

A Turn in Trinidad*

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Like a lot of other countries, Trinidad really has only one airport. It only has one runway, too, and it's oriented east-west.

The American carriers serving Piarco are American and United -- American with a daily airbus from San Juan and United with a daily 757 from Chicago, via Miami and Caracas. Landing is usually from the west, over the Gulf of Paria, so people with seats on the left side of the plane see Port-of-Spain - or, if they're on United, the city's lights, because United arrives just after midnight. Behind the city they see the northern coastal range, too, which extends 40 miles east of the city and fringes the length of the island's north coast. The mountains are heavily forested, rugged, and penetrated by roads only on the west, near the city.

From the right-hand side, you don't see so much. In daylight there are the swamps of the Caroni River. To their south are the green plains that have grown sugarcane here for nearly two centuries. Finally, in the distance, there are the subdued southern mountains. At night there are lights from that direction; they belong to the oil refineries near San Fernando, twenty miles to the south. The brightest light, however, is the distant solar flare from an oil platform off the island's southeast coast.

It's easy to rent a car, and there's a four-lane road to Port-of-Spain. It's the east-west Churchill-Roosevelt Highway, and it's one of Trinidad's two main roads. (A few miles west of the airport you intersect the other one, at a T-junction heading south to San Fernando.) The Churchill-Roosevelt is the older of the two: it's a vestige of Lend-Lease and was built to serve a military airfield the Americans constructed ten miles east of Piarco. This was Waller Field, built as a way station for bombers on their way to Africa, and it was promptly abandoned after the War: there's nothing left except a fine concrete runway with lots of grass in its expansion joints. The Churchill-Roosevelt Highway is different: except for the deserted few miles near Waller Field, it's heavily used early in the morning and late in the afternoon by commuters from Port-of-Spain's eastern suburbs--places like Tunapuna, Arouca, and Arima. You bypass some of them on the way in.

The old Spanish grid at the center of Port-of-Spain survives. It's roughly a kilometer square, with a main street formerly called King. Predictably, in a post-colonial age where wounds haven't healed, it's been renamed

Independence. The city has only two high rises. One houses the Finance Ministry. The other is the 10-story Holiday Inn, where interior shabbiness hints at the damage done by declining oil revenues. There are Catholic and Anglican cathedrals and a few other big colonial leftovers, but the general impression is of small buildings, independent merchants, and plenty of traffic, some with wheels and some with feet.

Port-of-Spain was much praised by Derek Walcott in his Nobel acceptance speech of 1992. Walcott spoke of the city's mongrelized ferment, and he called it heaven, but roti shops that are supposed to close at eight (the roti is Trinidad's most popular fast food) actually start shutting down at seven. The shopkeepers say they are afraid; crime is up. So is homelessness: you see sheets of precious cardboard, bits of old boxes spread out at night to soften downtown doorsteps. Early on a Sunday morning in November, after a brief but intense shower, a man comes up and asks for a couple of dollars: he takes five minutes to explain that he used to live in Arizona, is a musician, spent everything last night at a concert, needs bus fare home. The nearby Anglican cathedral is very quiet this same morning, but kitty-corner to it there's a building whose upstairs windows are flung wide open. It's a Primitive Baptist service, and these are people who like to sing. Three young German tourists -- there are very few tourists in Trinidad, and those few stand out -- wonder if they dare go up to look.

To the east of the old grid is a steep mountain spur covered with chaotic slums; to the west, on flat land, there's a new grid, early this century welded onto the original one. The lots here are small, and the houses have only one story, but the sidewalks are clean, the fences are solid, and the homes are of plastered blocks, painted in pastels. Nearby, at the water's edge, there's an industrial district, a container port, and a stadium; they're all on land reclaimed from the sea by the energetic Americans. (The British found it terribly depressing: they had held Trinidad since Napoleon's time, they were used to skinflint budgets, and they were amazed how much the Americans could do -- and how fast they could do it.) Between the industrial land and the new grid there's a four-lane coast road, an extension of the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. It goes to what once was an American naval base, another relic of Lend-Lease, this one not abandoned until 1967. The huge steel buildings echo in silence: the old base roads wind through hills and return to jungle.

To the north of the old Spanish grid and just past the Queen's Park Savannah, you'll find the walled compounds and dogs of the rich. The embassies are here, of course, the foreigners, the Presidential palace, the American banks, the resort-like Hilton, and a new upscale shopping center. On Sunday night, when everything else in town is closed, the shops here are crowded with people with money to spend, people -- is it true or just my memory? -- whose skin is lighter than usual for Trinidad.

You can penetrate the hills behind Port-of-Spain and its eastern suburbs. In a steep half hour you come to a misty and cliffed north coast, too rugged for boats to find anchorage. Along the way there are scattered clearings, but mostly the mountains have slipped from cacao plantation back to forest. It's a fast transition, for cacao here was traditionally grown under shade.

Why slipped back? Cacao was established here in the 1880s, when sugar prices were low. By World War I a fifth of the island was in cacao famous for its fine quality. But the Gold Coast came onstream after World War I, and late in the '20s a weed called witchbroom came to Trinidad. By 1940 Trinidad's cacao exports had fallen 75 percent, and nowadays they are only a tenth of what they were in 1916. You pass occasional groves, but they are usually in dire need of pruning.

Cacao is more likely to come to mind as you pass the Cadbury processing plant on the highway in from Piarco -- or perhaps when, in the northern valleys, you see a surviving plantation house. Some are very handsome, with verandas and plenty of latticework. People say they are riddled with termite damage, but they still have a charm missing from the new houses that are popping up nearby: houses on new streets with names like Kensington Avenue, houses with barred windows, chain-link fences, and razor wire.

Go farther afield. In the space of two hours you can leave Port-of-Spain, pass Waller Field, and head out along the ten miles of smooth beach but rough surf at Matura Bay, on the east coast. (Green turtles nest here each summer: the beach is closed then.) Within three hours you can make your way to the northeastern tip of the island, at Galera Point.

The road crosses lots of bridges, and they all have the word London on the manufacturer's plates riveted to the old box girders. There are a few other vestiges of Empire. At Galera Point itself there's a lighthouse with the letters VR and J and the date 1897. The VR is plain enough: Victoria Regina. The J can take a while, until you remember that 1897 was the sixtieth year of Victoria's rule, her much-celebrated jubilee.

There's not much else from the colonial past. The northeast trades throw a strong surf against igneous headlands. The vegetation, like chaparral, is permanently bent to the southwest. Seagulls look like they're trying, with zero prospect of success, to get to Europe. There's not an Englishman in sight.

Officially, they got out in 1958, when Port-of-Spain became the capital of the newly independent British West Indian Federation: a young Princess Margaret came for the occasion. But Jamaica soon dropped out, and, as the local arithmetic puts it, ten minus one in this case made zero. Trinidad, joined with nearby Tobago, was on its own by 1962, and in a nation of over a million people today, there aren't ten thousand of European extraction.

The town closest to Galera Point is called Toco, and almost everyone in it is a descendent of the slaves who after emancipation in 1838 left Trinidad's cane plantations and headed for the remotest refuge they could find on the island.

Perhaps there are two hundred homes in Toco today. Almost all are small and some are very poor, but others are meticulously kept up. Many of the better ones have large, black, plastic water tanks: the local hardware store also sells plastic pipe, galvanized roofing, and construction blocks. The strange thing is that nearly all of Toco's dozen or so stores are permanently shuttered: the only places open when I came through were the hardware store, a credit union, a Shell gas station owned by a Chinese, and a grocery owned by Toco's other Chinese, a man whose sign read "Gaston Lee Tung, licensed copra merchant." His father had built the store; Gaston had been born in it. He asked if it was true that grocery stores in America were self-service. He wanted to know if America had stores like his, where a floor-to-ceiling woven-wire screen kept customers away from the merchandise and where all transactions were done through a head-sized hole in the screen.

Why were all the other stores in Toco closed? Gaston said that people preferred to shop in bigger towns with lower prices. I told him it was the same where I lived, except that people didn't go to town in minibuses; they drove their own cars.

Emancipation threw the cane plantations into an instant crisis. The solution was the prompt opening of a recruiting office in Calcutta. This was the Trinidad Emigration Department, through which nearly 150,000 Indians passed between 1845 and 1917. In exchange for passage, they were indentured for five years.

That's why Trinidad today has as many Indians as Africans. You don't see them in Toco, and you're not likely to appreciate their numbers even in Port-of-Spain, where they are outnumbered two to one. But go back to the T-junction on the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway and head south to the town of Chaguanas in the cane-growing plains. There the balance is reversed and more, with Indians outnumbering Africans four to one.

I went with expectations: hopes that I could find some old Indian jewelry or textiles. No luck: there's no old Indian stuff anywhere in Trinidad, at least not for sale.

I suppose that's because the immigrants came naked. But there's almost no new Indian stuff in Trinidad either: jewelry tastes, for example, run overwhelmingly to American products. The ties to India have in fact been stretched nearly to the breaking point. Consider how hard it is to find an Indian in the United States who doesn't know the village from which his ancestors came. Not so in Trinidad. I wandered around a place called Patna: everyone was Indian, but not

one person in the local grocery store knew where the name Patna came from: not one even knew that there was a city in India *called* Patna. I asked a travel agent about tickets to Delhi: a few well-off Indians did buy them, he said, but they went as religious pilgrims, not as people returning home.

So Hinduism survives. There are stores that sell nothing but "puja materials," the stuff required for domestic worship, and there are hundreds of temples. But even here the changes have been profound. I got a flat tire near the town of Cunupia, and while it was being patched I crossed the street and walked into a neighborhood Hindu temple: a conglomerate temple to Hanuman and Shiva and Lord Krishna and still others. The priest lived next door -- a nice house. He explained that he personally owned the temple; it was a business investment.

Hinduism is famous for its elasticity, but in Trinidad it is stretched in ways that would be inconceivable in India. Consider the town of Chaguanas, which appears under the name Arwacas in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Readers get the sense of a sleepy place, distinctly Asian in flavor. It may have been so early this century (Naipaul is writing of the time when his father was a boy), and there are still a few old abandoned shophouses from that period: stores on the ground floor, residences upstairs, with sculpted lions at the corners of the porticoes. You can hardly miss the old main street residence of the district medical officer, Dr. Indarjit Birjah, M.B.B.S. It's still in use, an old wood-frame building in colonial ocher.

But across the street are two big Canadian banks: the Bank of Commerce and the Royal Bank. Here's Plaza 2001, all high-tech steel and glass. Here's Hingoo's Travel, with Christmas specials to New York and Toronto -- nothing about Delhi. Here's Bert's Sport Centre, and here's Footland, with "Shoes for the Entire Family." Here's a push cart loaded with apples from Washington State, courtesy of refrigerated containers offloaded at Port-of-Spain.

And now we enter Naipaul's Supermarket: telephone 665-3010. There's a shelf loaded with five-pound bags of curry powder. One would never see such a thing in India, but the women in Chaguanas, the clerk says, are too busy to mix their own. And though Mr. Naipaul is a Brahmin, his store has a meat department. Not only that. The butcher sells beef -- minced beef, beef liver, beef tripe, beef stew-meat. Nothing hidden about it: the words are all there, bold on the blackboard.

Can it be? Down the street there are fast-food shops specializing in buss-up-shuts, the Trinidad equivalent of paratha. And there are beef buss-up-shuts. I went into Ananda's Indian Cuisine, where there was a sign advertising burgers, chicken 'n chips, hog dogs, roti, and beef buss-up-shuts. Ananda smiled and said that about half of Trinidad's Indians ate beef. He himself handled it but would not put it in his mouth.

Beef-eating Hindus? Shall we remember the destitution of the arriving immigrants? (V.S. Naipaul's grandmother came not only naked but shamed, unable to stay in India.) Or shall we weigh the decades in which these people lived as coolies, despised and humiliated? Perhaps we should blame Trinidad television, which carries *Good Morning America*, Peter Jennings, and *Jeopardy*.

Come out into the smaller places around Chaguanas, places like Indian Walk, Barrackpore, Calcutta Settlement. (How many locals know where the namesake Barrackpore is?) My flat tire had been at such a place, when I stopped to inspect what in Trinidad is called an "earth house." These are like Tudor shacks, with heavy framing and a mud-brick infill, faced with more mud and straw. While I was jacking the car up, I got into a conversation about these houses with a man doing some roadside weed whacking for the local public-works department. He said he could build me an earth house for \$15. That was a 1960s price and it would have to be adjusted for inflation, he said, but he'd do the job right, with *tapia* grass for the mud-brick and *gludlu* wood for the frame. All I had to do, when I was ready, was come to Conupia and ask for him by name: the "sewing-machine man." Everybody knew him that way, he said.

There aren't great many earth houses in Trinidad. Mostly in these small towns you see run-down shacks of never-painted wood, places with rusty, corrugated-metal roofs. There are shutters for windows that once had glass; above, there are wood-barred clerestories.

There are lots of new homes, too, places of solid masonry, well kept-up. It's puzzling, because the sugarcane industry is in very poor shape. True, there are 30,000 acres of cane grown in Trinidad, exactly the same as in 1930 -- or 1900. That doesn't sound so decrepit. But Trinidad is now on the third chemical it has tried in its war against froghoppers, and there have been problems of land ownership and incentives.

Back in 1968, nine-tenths of the island's cane was controlled by Tate and Lyle. Two years later the government bought a controlling interest in the company's island properties and, like the clockwork accompanying government takeovers, production crashed. The 30,000 acres of land that yielded 160,000 tons of sugar in 1930 now produce 100,000 tons. Trade magazines talk about Trinidad producing the highest-cost sugar in the world.

So how is it that one sees good new houses out here in the cane villages? The answer is that in the last years of British rule a third of Trinidad's labor force worked in agriculture: now the figure is down to less than ten percent. So when I asked one man about a good house in such a village he said that it belonged to a couple of teachers. The starting net monthly salary for a teacher, he said, was the equivalent of 600 U.S. dollars. Not bad. Other places, he said, belonged to men who worked in oil.

Like cane, however, oil is in trouble: production has fallen by a third from its peak in 1978, and income is down even more sharply. But there's still a great deal of wealth in the community. Go to San Fernando and visit the Hilltop Neighborhood. I suppose that an American college professor, stretching, could afford to buy a garage down here. The city's not all rich of course, but a big new mall opened last year: it has a supermarket, ATMs, film kiosks, book stores, and American fast food. Downtown, near the old colonial fish market, you can see the Trinidad Government Railway depot. The tracks were taken up in the 1960s and replaced by buses that run back and forth hourly to Port-of-Spain.

I liked San Fernando. Perhaps it's because I wasn't hustled there. I liked San Fernando so much that during my week in Trinidad I actually found myself commuting the twenty miles between San Fernando and the University of the West Indies, which is between Piarcó and Port-of-Spain. Morning and night I was earnestly reading in what is now called the West Indiana Collection. Mostly I was reading about the old Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture, set up by the British in 1926 on the site now occupied by the University. The old College building now houses the University administration; there's an unobtrusive corner stone with a fine Latin motto which translates as "the way of the cultivator is by no means easy."

I would read morning and night -- read about witchweed and froghoppers, alternative crops and marketing problems -- then spend the afternoon looking around. One afternoon I went down to the south coast near a big teak plantation at a place called Morne Diablo. There was a scattering of single-room shacks housing big families. But why this paved road going all the way to the sea? It ended bang at the beach, and there were no swimmers, no picnickers, no tourist facilities. Instead there were four or five beached fishing boats, dorries more or less.

Every morning at two o'clock fishermen arrived here and set out to sea, four to a boat. They went seven miles to the Venezuela border, which they recognized when the water turned silty from the flow of the Orinoco. Here the men fished for sharks. They worked without lights, for Guyanese pirates were fishing for outboard motors. The Trinidadians came back at dawn, and merchants from the San Fernando fish market were waiting with trucks. That's why there was a good road.

The man who told me all this was the only person at the beach this afternoon. He lived out here -- the only person to do so -- and he worked for one of the boat owners. Twice, he said, he had been on boats that had had their motors stolen. It had been a long way back, rowing. His father had been a fisherman, too. He had fallen overboard and drowned; the body had been pulled up in another man's nets. The son had been ten at the time: two years later his "queen" died. He meant his mother. So now he was here, perhaps age twenty,

patching nets. Looking back I know that there were some things I missed in the library, some people I should have talked to in government offices. But what I regret most is that I never got back to this fisherman, never got around to seeing Gaston Lee Tung again, never got around to talking a little more about earth houses.

*Revised slightly but not updated from the version read at the AAG annual meeting, San Francisco, 1995.